

MARX and FEMINISM

Selma James

centrepiece 12

Marx and Feminism was one of the 1983 Jubilee Group Lent Lectures, held at St. Botolph's Church, Aldgate, London. The theme that year, the centenary of the death of Karl Marx, was "After Marx". The lectures were published in 1984 under the same title in order to "promote a serious-minded study of Marx among Christian people, and [to] be of use to a wider audience".

In 1986 *Marx and Feminism* was featured in the Third World Book Review issue on "Karl Marx and the Third World" since it "argues for a new unity of the oppressed in the struggle against exploitation" by "questioning those who would limit [Marx's] relevance to the 'working class'".

This edition has been revised, but its original character as a speech has been retained.

Selma James is the founder of the International Wages for Housework Campaign. Publications include: (with M.Dalla Costa) *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, 3rd edn. Falling Wall Press, Bristol, 1975; *Women, the Unions and Work, or what is not to be done*, 3rd edn. Falling Wall Press, 1976; *Sex, Race and Class*, Centrepiece 1, 1986; (with R.Hall and J.Kertesz) *The Rapist Who Pays the Rent*, 2nd edn. Falling Wall Press, 1984; and *The Ladies and the Mammies: Jane Austen and Jean Rhys*, Falling Wall Press, 1983. She edited and introduced *Strangers and Sisters: Women, Race and Immigration*, Falling Wall Press, 1985.

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a CROSSROADS centrepiece

Marx and feminism

First about the title. I asked that this talk be called *Marx and Feminism* rather than *Marxism and Feminism* because Marxism is disputed territory. Just what it means, and who it means, vary greatly from one political circle to another.* But we can go to Marx and find out some of what he said. Then we can test his specific relevance to women, and to organizing within the women's movement. That is what I plan to do, bearing in mind that

Marx's analysis of capitalist production was not a meditation on how the society "ticked". It was a tool to find the way to overthrow it.¹

Since Marx concentrated on thus dissecting capitalism in order to fashion an organizing tool, it follows that he makes the most sense in the context of organizing, where his ideas can be tested and — if they are to remain viable — developed.

I must declare an interest early. His analysis has been indispensable to my organizing. He penetrates capitalist reality, including in my own life and, from what I can see, in other people's, as no one else does, and helps keep me focussed on that reality by warding off invasions of the enemy's logic, excuses and invitations to egomania.² I am profoundly grateful for that help.

Which leads to my second point by way of introduction. While this year is the hundredth anniversary of the death of Marx, which I am honoured to be called on to celebrate with you in this way, it happens to be another anniversary. Today** is 10 years to the day since I was arrested in a sit-in of women and

* See 1994 Update on p.23.

** Tenth March 1983.

children at the main London post office in Trafalgar Square, when the Wages for Housework Campaign took its first public actions: protesting the government's attempts to take Family Allowance away from women and put it into men's hands.³ It seems entirely appropriate for me to celebrate that occasion — one is not arrested every day (at least not yet, though there are signs in this country that it may soon come to that) — to celebrate that occasion, together with the Marx centenary, here in this church.

And that leads to my third and final introductory point. You may know that some of us have got unusually intimate with churches in the last few months. I was fortunate enough to spend 12 days in November 1982 in the Church of the Holy Cross, King's Cross,⁴ with about 15 or 20 other women. And we liked it there. As a matter of fact, we liked it so much that the vicar (who was not exactly friendly) had a lot of trouble getting us out.

Thus before we plunge into the substance of the topic, you know something of the terrain from which the ideas spring that you are about to consider.

The women's movement began in the late sixties and early seventies — that is, this new women's movement. There is always a women's movement; women are always privately saying No, and from time to time organizing publicly to say No. But the vocal and visible massive movement that we know today began then, in a number of countries almost at once.⁵ There are some things that it made clear right away: that we were subject to domestic slavery; that we were often financially dependent on men; that we didn't have equal pay; that we didn't control the reproductive processes which went on in our own bodies; that we were the victims of sexual exploitation of many kinds; and that we were much more likely to be passive and much less likely to be effective compared to men — in a word, that we had colonized lives and personalities.⁶ And the question was not long after posed: what relationship does all this bear to class and class struggle as it had been traditionally defined and passed on to us by the Left?

On the one hand: how much are men to blame? Are they the sole beneficiaries of our exploitation? Are they the enemy, men one class and women another?⁷ On the other hand: what is the relationship of our demands as women to class? Equal pay may

be about workers, but is abortion, sterilization, housework, rape, divorce, child custody and care, lesbianism, dress, personality, orgasms?⁸ The question ultimately came down to: who is “the working class” and what income level, work, political issues, demands and actions distinguish it? The question could not have been more basic and more obvious, but it was almost never clearly articulated, because even posing it then challenged everybody: not only the State,⁹ but the Left Establishment, even the Left *alternative* Establishment. And because they were challenged, they worked overtime to dismiss, with the charge of ignorance or even betrayal, any of us who dared to ask. Marx, they said, had answered a hundred years before; surely that was enough! Under such pressure, clarity — even putting questions to yourself clearly — is hard won.

Now many things were happening at the same time as the women’s movement was forming itself. Other movements were also flexing their muscles and by their existence posing the same question, which made the business of defining the working class even more urgent and generally important. Others, even men if they were not in factories, were also told they were not working class. And even some “workers” could be dismissed as “marginal”, “peripheral”, i.e., not central, insignificant, unable to influence the course of history or even to have more than a minimal effect in the struggle for their own liberation. Liberation was dependent on a separate, other, unrelated force: “the real working class”.

This was the time of urban rebellions, in the United States in particular, where millions of people challenged the American State, the most powerful and oppressive in the world. (Mind you, it has competition, but it wins.) The people who challenged that State’s power in the streets of its own major cities as well as in Third World countries like Vietnam (Vietnam was the most spectacular, but it was happening in many places) were also not traditionally considered to be part of “the working class”.

Sections of the Left tried to minimize the importance and the effect of these struggles, in order to protect their working class (which it seems, had a closed shop on effectiveness) and prevent it, apparently, from being upstaged. Others, mainly academics, even some who called themselves Marxists, seized this opportunity to say that Marx may have been right once but he was now passé. The working class are not the “gravediggers of capitalism”, as he had said; they were never going to do anything; they had all sold out — they had refrigerators.¹⁰

We can laugh at that now, but they did literally say that, especially about the working class in the United States. These others, Black people (presumably the ones without fridges), students, "peasants", they were the ones with the consciousness and the will to take on the job of overthrowing capitalism, to the exclusion of, even in spite of, "the working class". Marxists and anti-Marxists alike asked us to choose between "the workers" and "the others".

In the midst of this confusion, some of us were clever enough to look for ourselves at what Marx had to say. We were not satisfied with analyses in jargon of what he "really meant"; or assertions by learned academics that the young Marx — German poet and philosopher — was superior to the mature Marx — German immigrant to England, organizer and theoretician. It did not pass our notice that it was academics who carried the weight in defining what Marxism was to be. From universities they head organizations of the Left, and/or write the books that the Left studies and commends to us.

We refused also to be satisfied with what Marxist governments, which rule at least half the world's population,* [*The Eastern European regimes were still in power in 1983.] said Marx was about. The emphasis and interpretations of governments are shaped by their need to retain power. Thus Third World governments may need to defend the Russian or the Chinese brand of brutality on which they depend for defence and aid, even if they would prefer not to. "Put not your trust in princes" applies even to Marxist princes.

Those of us who read Marx found out a number of things. It is not possible to go into all of them here, but some basics should be generally known, and since Marx is not hard to understand (and is a brilliant and exciting exponent of his views), it is not difficult or painful to know them. I will summarize very briefly some things that I believe are fundamental, and then relate them to the women's movement as we know it, and to other sectors of society who are also visibly organizing and also defined out of the working class. To define, or rather redefine, who are the working class is an ambitious goal. Luckily the truth can usually be expressed simply.

Marx said that what distinguishes one society from another is the way in which human beings relate to each other in the course of working to reproduce ourselves: to survive and to develop as human beings. What distinguishes the social relations in which we reproduce ourselves in capitalist society is the wage relation: work previously done for a feudal lord or a slave master takes the form of waged work for an employer. But, he said, it is not our work that we sell for wages. It is our ability to work that the employer buys. Marx calls this ability to work *labour power*. By buying the use of our labour power, the employer buys the right to tell us what to do for a fixed time, for the 40 or 50 hours a week that it belongs to him, and to own all of what we produce in that time. He gets as much as possible out of us during that agreed time.

In part of that time, let's say two, three or four hours a day, we are able to produce the equivalent of the wages he pays us: we receive what we produce in that time in the form of wages. Thus that time is paid time, that work is paid work.

For the rest of the day, what we produce is kept by the employer. Thus for the rest of the working day we work for free.

I'll repeat that, since this is the nub of Marx's work (which, by the way, he fully understood quite late in his productive life). In part of our working day, we produce enough for the employer to cover our wages, his cost for hiring our labour power. The product of that part of the day is paid to us; thus in that part of the day, we do paid work. We continue to produce for the rest of the day, but the employer keeps that. So for that part of the day we are not paid: for that part of the day we do unpaid work.

That is the heart of all that Marx said. When he had grasped this, it focussed all he had said before. The social relationship which is capital was, according to him, that capital owns and does what it likes with our labour time and its product. Marx called that *exploitation*.

The ratio of unpaid work time to paid work time he called the *rate of exploitation*. So that if in four hours of an eight-hour day, you produce enough to pay your wages, and in the other four hours you work for free, the rate of exploitation is 100 per cent: you do twice as much as you get paid for doing. You produce 100 per cent more than you get paid for.¹¹

But capitalist appearances are deceptive. The wage you get looks like payment for the whole day. The wage, which keeps you alive and able to continue to work, hides the unpaid part of your

working day, hides that there is an unpaid part. You feel ripped off, but it's hard to put your finger on what appears to be a fair exchange. This "fair exchange" — of labour power (which works a whole day) for wages (which pays for only part of the day) — hides robbery.

Now, ever since society was divided into classes (and it wasn't always), the working day had a paid portion and an unpaid portion. Those of us who were serfs worked for ourselves only after we had finished working on the land and the crops of the feudal master. When we worked on the land assigned to us we were paid — with what we had ourselves produced, which kept us alive and able to continue to work. When we worked for the feudal lord on his land, we worked for free — for the right to keep what we grew on our own patch.

Those of us who were slaves did paid work too: the master had to give us food and clothing and shelter, not much but some, to keep us alive and working, and what we produced in one part of our working day paid for this. But the rest of the time in which we expended our labour power was unpaid time: its product was kept by the master; no part of it came back to us in any form.

Thus the capitalist way, paying us wages for the daily or weekly or monthly sale of our labour power to keep us alive and working, is merely the latest form of dividing the working day between paid and unpaid labour so the ruling class can appropriate, can steal, unpaid labour. But it has wide implications.

There is a book on rape by a feminist called *Against Our Will*.¹² It is, among other deficiencies, a very racist book. Yet the title sums up precisely what Marx had to say about waged work in capitalist society. It is against our will. He's very witty and very precise: we are "compelled to sell [our labour power] voluntarily".¹³ We are forced to do it, and we do it freely. Only by doing this work to acquire a wage do we have the right, the social power — the money — to eat. Free choice under capitalism is the right to choose between forced labour and destitution.

Marx goes further. Doing forced labour is the condition of our survival at the cost of our development. When capital buys the use of our labour power, it is in charge of our working, of our activity for most of our waking hours. It is not only what we produce which capital takes, from which we are "alienated". It takes our possibilities. We are alienated from our own capacities, our ability to be creative, our ability to shape and reshape ourselves. Capital takes who we could be and limits us to who we

are. *It takes our time, which happens to be our life.* It takes us. We belong to it — not so different from the serf or the slave. Virtually all other activities are a preparation for work or a recuperation from it.¹⁴ That, Marx says, is wage labour, labour power sold as a commodity, exchanged for a wage. That is the terrain on which are shaped our personalities and all our relationships, private and public, personal and political, for the entire 24 hours of the day.

As the wage relation becomes the dominant form of stealing unpaid labour, the wage begins to dominate all relationships. For Marx, *capital is a social relation not only between classes but between all individuals.* All the relationships in society are transformed on the basis of this capitalist way in which human beings are exploited in the course of working to survive and develop. The most obvious, pervasive and fundamental change is that we relate to each other through things. Exchangeable with everything, money connects human beings. The *Communist Manifesto* had put it this way:

The bourgeoisie ... has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous "cash payment" . . . It has resolved personal worth into exchange value . . .¹⁵

The mature Marx was more precise. Our relationships are objectified, embodied in objects. The commodities we produce are "fetishized", that is, these things, in relating to each other through exchange, express our connection to each other no matter how far apart we are, and mediate between us no matter how near we are.

. . . the relationships between the producers, within which the social characteristics of their labours are manifested, take on the form of a social relation between the products of labour. . . . the labour of the private individual manifests itself as an element of the total labour of society only through the relations which the act of exchange establishes between the products, and through their mediation, between the producers.¹⁶

We are now so used to relating in this way that we take it for granted. But to allow the last 300 years of our history under

capitalism and the personalities we have developed because we were born and raised to live with and through the “cash nexus”, to be considered “natural” to us is clearly absurd. Yet it is the object of most sociology, psychology, journalism, writing of history, even of conventional medical and dietary dogma, to establish and confirm that who we are at this moment in time is all we can be; that our capitalist selves are “human nature” and our capitalist lives the product of that nature.

Marx’s accomplishments were considerable. He described the quality of the social relationship between labour power and capital, and then measured just how ripped off we are by it. How ripped off we are in things is a measure of how ripped off we are as human beings and as individuals in society. Marx explained what exploitation was — how it alienated us from our abilities and possibilities and from the product of our labour, how it came to take place, what were its implications — *and then he quantified it*. The class struggle is in essence to end exploitation and to transform the quality of our lives: we don’t wish to spend any of our precious time submitting to an alien — an alienating — will. But the form the class struggle takes is the daily war over the quantity of our lives which we are forced to give or can resist giving: how much exploitation we can organize to refuse, how much of our labour time will be paid and how much unpaid, how much or how little we will produce in how much time.

In 1969 and 1970, reading in Volume 1 of *Capital* all about this uniquely capitalist commodity labour power, I realized that this was the special commodity which housework produced. Being ignorant, I thought everybody knew and I was angry that they had neglected to tell us. It was a surprise to find that the obvious view — that women were the producers of everyone’s labour power, everyone’s ability to work and to be exploited — was new. In the course of spelling out the implications of this (and in the process shocking some well-meaning Left-wing people out of their political minds), I tried to describe the work which produced and reproduced labour power, the general sale of which defines a society as capitalist:

This is a strange commodity for it is not a thing. The ability to labour resides only in a human being whose life is consumed in the process of producing. First it

must be nine months in the womb, must be fed, clothed, trained. Then when it works, its bed must be made, its floors swept, its lunchbox prepared, its sexuality not gratified but quietened, its dinner ready when it gets home even if this is eight in the morning from the night shift. This is how labour power is produced and reproduced when it is daily consumed in the factory or the office. To describe its basic production and reproduction is to describe women's work.¹⁷

I invented the word "unwaged" to describe this "women's work", this housework.¹⁸ Although we got no wage for doing it, it wasn't entirely unpaid — remember? For some we are paid in the form of food, clothing and shelter. But we get no money in our own right for expending our labour power in producing other people's labour power. We are deprived of money of our own, wages which are ours by right, acknowledgement of and reward for a contribution to social labour. Without recognition of what we contribute, we lack the socially accepted justification to claim autonomy as individuals. Without money of our own, we lack the power to take that autonomy.

But though it brings no wage, this work is not outside the wage relation. We are neither serfs nor slaves. The wage and the wage relation, often in the form of a man's wage, commands the work we do; the wage and the wage relation dominates the society we do this work for, and thus most directly dominates us.

The wage relation is not only a power relation between waged worker and employer but between those workers who do and those workers who do not have wages. This is the material basis of the social antagonism between the sexes. Whether or not we are in a relationship with men, let alone a dependent relationship, women's dependence in the society generally sets the terms of the relationship between all men and all women. Whether or not money passes hands between any particular individuals, the "cash nexus" binds the sexes to each other and into society. Women, the poorer sex, are the socially weaker sex; men, more powerful financially, can exercise social power against us in every area of life.

Since when housework is unwaged no money passes hands as it does between employer and waged worker, it appears to be a strictly private matter, on the woman's part a labour of love, in

keeping with the compliant and generous female nature. Thus the capitalist theory of "human nature" glorifies and praises women's poverty and hides our unwaged slavery. Hidden with it is the fact that we work for the employing class, which uses our product as an inexhaustible source of unpaid — and unwaged — labour. But in the same way that the work of those who are waged is forced labour; in the same way that they have little opportunity because of this labour to learn, to invent, to create and to develop and exercise talents; in that same way the producers of labour power without a wage are also doing forced labour, are also deprived of their time and their possibilities.

The work we do, housework, is also against our will; we too are compelled by economic necessity to sell our labour power voluntarily. And though we sell it to the same employer, it is usually through another employee, attaching ourselves to a man's wage, and becoming his dependent.¹⁹ In reproducing him and the children who will one day replace him — and us — we are protecting and enhancing capital's investment in him and in ourselves.

There are many things I like about Marx. One of them is that he is so confident of our case, and he has grounded it so well, that he did not hesitate to spell out our weaknesses. He was not worried about being critical of workers. He speaks at one point of how, in addition to the man selling his own labour power for a wage, when his wife and children are also introduced into the factory he sells them as well. The man, he says, becomes a slave dealer.²⁰ For Marx, our case does not rest on working class moral superiority, or on anyone's moral virtues or lack of them. Our case is just and necessary because our struggle against capital makes freedom possible. Despite our weaknesses, ignorance, superstitions and prejudices, what we struggle for as a class is the abolition of exploitation.

There is therefore no need to glorify "the worker" as a heroic and blameless victim; no need to hide or excuse the violence which is the framework of working class life; no need to mythologize the working class as the fount of humanism. Marx wasn't worried that the revolution would fail because workers — in this case husbands and fathers — were guilty of brutality against other workers — in this case wives and children. We are brutal to each other all the time. We are compelled to sell ourselves — what we are and what we can be — voluntarily, compelled to spend our waking lives in activities which we have not chosen or designed, an alien will imposed on us, directly and through

others, from birth. This is the violence which we are forced to endure.

We absorb violence from those above and then let it out on those less powerful than we are. If the man is waged and the person he lives with is dependent, even in part, on his wage and in exchange has as her life's work to serve him so that he is fit to do the work he does against his will, then wife-beating is not a mystery. In that hostile environment where within this power relation each is trying to survive and to cut down on the amount of work that both are compelled to do against their will, what's astonishing is that men and women even talk to each other, let alone live together and occasionally even love each other.

It is also important to see that once men are identified as those who have the wage (or should have if they don't), and women as those who don't have a wage (and don't need to even if they do), almost any man can get women to reproduce him, to cook his eggs, make his bed, comfort him, and sleep with him. In very crucial respects, women are part of the male wage.²¹ We come with the male pay packet because we traditionally lack our own.

Being part of another worker's wage is the fate not only of women in relation to men. Some years ago I compared the wage rates of skilled white workers in Johannesburg with skilled workers (largely white but some Black, and all men) in Detroit working for the same employers: Chrysler. White workers in South Africa were getting a great deal less than their counterparts in Detroit. Yet their standard of living was in many respects higher. Black South Africans are part of their wage. Capital can pay whites less because a whole set of goods and services — a whole set of Black labour — is commanded by the white wage. Many of us in the world who are from sectors which tend to be unwaged, and are therefore low-waged, are part of someone else's wage.²²

In fact, if we give it a moment's thought, we will realize that on a world level the number of people who get any wages at all is tiny. Most of us are unwaged, and many of us because of this must work under the command of other workers who stand as foremen — even sometimes employers — in relation to us.²³ Thus though the few (the "havelittles"²⁴) have the wage and the many (the "havenots") do not, all of us are dominated by it and by the struggle to survive through it.

This conflict on an international level between the waged minority and the unwaged majority has appeared as a conflict between different classes, rather than between different sectors within the same class. The implication is that the conflict between us is irreconcilable. I want to cite two quotations from Marx, the first on how these divisions within the working class, these power relations, were built into the process of production in the first place, and the second on how he saw the development of these divisions.

Marx was first of all describing "manufacture", an early stage of capitalism (*manu* = hand), later superseded by the "machinofacture" of large-scale industry. Manufacture, he says:

develops a hierarchy of labour powers, to which there corresponds a scale of wages. The individual workers are appropriated and annexed for life by a limited function; while the various operations of the hierarchy of labour powers are parcelled out among the workers according to both their natural and their acquired capacities.²⁵

So here was capital organizing production politically; organizing for one worker to be above, and therefore against, another; creating a hierarchy of skills, money and social power. (Marx had already said that an "individual carries his social power . . . in his pocket".²⁶)

He then shows how the hierarchy was reorganized when machines replaced hand production:

Along with the tool, the skill of the worker in handling it passes over to the machine. [Your skill is now objectified —embodied in an object — thus lowering your value to capital, your social worth. On the other hand, this is also potentially useful:] The capabilities of the tool are emancipated from the restraints inseparable from human labour power. This destroys the technical foundation on which the division of labour in manufacture was based [the hierarchy of labour powers we described above]. Hence, in the place of the hierarchy of specialized workers that characterizes manufacture, there appears, in the automatic factory, a tendency to equalize and reduce to an identical level every kind of work that has to be done by the minders of the machines; . . .

Now he didn't use the word "automatic" as we use it today. He meant that with steam power, you didn't turn the machine by hand; the steam turned it automatically; and the power for each machine derived from a central source independent of the individual machine operator. No longer was an operation dependent on the size or strength or even the skill of the operator. The machine now equalized us. Does that mean the end of the hierarchy? Quite the contrary. He continues:

... in place of the artificially produced distinctions between the specialized workers, it is natural differences of age and sex that predominate.²⁷

So that the hierarchical wedge, first inserted between men and men, dividing them from each other on the basis of skill, is now also inserted between men and women and children. Biological differences become social divisions. Capital was able to divide the single workplace in that way, and then whole branches of industry in that way, and eventually the whole world in that way. In capital's hands, *the division of labour is first and foremost the division of labourers, on an international scale.*

In 1973 we drew the conclusion for the extension of that division of labourers from the waged workplace to the society generally:

A hierarchy of labour powers and a scale of wages to correspond. Racism and sexism training us to acquire and develop certain capabilities at the expense of others. [You learn to pull a lever but that's all you learn. You do not learn a million other things because your time and your energy are consumed and your will is sapped by your enforced submission to pulling that lever. Or changing that nappy.] Then these acquired capabilities are taken to be our nature and fix our functions for life, and fix also the quality of our mutual relations. [They think we are made for this work. Worse: some part of us thinks so too.] So planting cane or tea is not a job for white people, and changing nappies is not a job for men, and beating children is not violence. Race, sex, age, nation, each an indispensable element of the international division of labour. *Our feminism bases itself on a hitherto invisible stratum of the hierarchy of labour powers —*

*the housewife — to which there corresponds no wage at all.*²⁸

You can see how useful Marx has been to the Wages for Housework Campaign. There are feminists who take pleasure in denigrating and dismissing him. The excuse they sometimes give is that he was a man, or that he was a male chauvinistic pig. He can be defended from this charge, but what if it were true? Surely it is worth hearing what men think is wrong with the world (especially men dedicated to the destruction of capital!), even if they are sexist, since we can't win without them. And if you exclude the sexists and the racists and the ageists, etc., who is left? Which of us is "pure"? In any case, I don't think the elevation of women is dependent on the denigration of men. It is at best self-indulgent to reduce Marx in this way. Frankly, I am suspicious.

We are all aware of how much hostility there is to Marx by those who rule us precisely because he is such a power for us against them that a century after his death he continues to make them nervous. Thus it is extremely saleable to be anti-Marx. You can make a career that way. You can get a job, or a research grant, or invitations to important conferences, important dinners — at the very least, important wine and cheese parties. I don't say that's the only motivation of those who dismiss Marx, but it is no discouragement.

I cannot show that the hierarchy of labour powers was a focus of Marx's. I found these two quotations; I was feeling my way to such a view when I came upon them. It was because Marx was scrupulous about putting down all he saw the mode of production to be that he described the hierarchy as integral to it. But he draws no organizational conclusion from it. His aim was to analyse the condition general to all of us: what we shared rather than what divided us. A certain kind of political organization flows from that. He formed the First International. He fought for "workers of all countries [to] unite" in an organization together. Considering how divided we were, based on the division of labour and on other historical and geographical divisions, it was new and revolutionary to establish our commonality. He did that work.

In the hundred years since his death, it is perfectly clear that, while unity is as central today,²⁹ it will be built only in the process of attacking and destroying the hierarchy. The struggles of most of us have suffered when we united in organizations dominated by more powerful sectors of the working class. Thus increasingly we have organized ourselves very specifically against the hierarchy: the Black movement, the women's movement, the movement of Third World peoples, the movements of women and men with disabilities, the movements of lesbian women and gay men, the movement of Third World women, the movement of ex-mental patients, prisoners, ex-prisoners, parents of children with cancer, prostitute women, transvestites, welfare recipients, students, farmers, "farmers' wives" . . . the list is endless and continues to grow: all kinds of movements which presume that each sector has a specific attack to make on capitalist society that only it can make in organizations that only it can form and within which it can sort out and even fight out who and what are its friends, enemies, needs, strategy, tactics.

The existence of these movements confirms that the hierarchy does not cease at the factory gates. Born in the need to subordinate the will of the working class to the will of capital, the hierarchy extends up to stratify managements and bureaucracies and down to stratify factories and farms and families. The whole society is involved in the division of labour and in the hierarchy, the division of the labourers. Wherever we are, our moves are adapted to — or subversive — to the specific hierarchy in which we are enmeshed, the niche our sector is squeezed into, even on a street, even in a tenants' association, even in King's Cross between those of us who are prostitutes, those of us who are clients, and those of us who are neither: a red-light area is one of the many points of conflict between various sectors of the working class, which we as a working class are confronting in the only way we can, by each sector making its own direct and specific attack on capital and its State.

Once we do that, however, we come into immediate conflict with those sectors of the working class which stand above us and for capital in relation to us.³⁰ Yes, we do. There is no question that if we are Black we find ourselves against white people. If we are women we find ourselves against men. And if we are Black women we find ourselves against Black men and white men and white women. If we are children we find ourselves against our exploited mothers who stand against our exploited fathers who

stand against employers and other more powerful women and men. That is the fabric of the world in which we live. That is the structure of exploitation, of the working class and of the social relation which is capital. It is a very complicated hierarchy and demands a very complicated network of organizations to destroy it, *which millions of us have been forming*.

That is the vital point. Not merely do we face an enormous and complicated task, but also we have tackled it. *That is why we now know so much about the hierarchy*. We did not invent these divisions (though we were accused of splitting the working class when we formed autonomous organizations to deal with them). They were invented, and continue to be reinvented, along with the rest of the mode of production. But now that we massively confront these divisions in an increasingly organized way, the hierarchy can no longer be denied — a giant step in the process of its destruction.

Now I want to draw two conclusions.

First, everything that I have been saying assumes that the wage (what capital pays us) is the crucial point of conflict between us and capital. They want the money; so do we. They want the money because they want to force us to work. We want the money because we don't want to be forced to work. We understand each other perfectly; we just disagree. When the Wages for Housework Campaign began in 1972 it was precisely to make visible and to advance the struggle for wages by those of us who are unwaged. Other unwaged sectors besides women have also articulated their wage demands. When Black people in the United States said they wanted reparations for slavery, it was back pay. And they said so.³¹ Everywhere in all kinds of ways the unwaged are quantifying our exploitation.

But the wage is not only money. It comes also in the form of goods and services. The Tories are robbing us of a National Health Service; that's our wage. We take a wage cut every time they cut any social service. That's our social wage, what we get in the form of services which we try not to pay again for, either in time or money.

And the wage is what we refuse to give in time. Winning half an hour, 15 minutes, sometimes even five minutes, in the waged workplace — those of you who know factories will know that five minutes can be a lot of your time to reclaim — you get a wage rise

of five minutes: you take five minutes of your life back from the vultures. The Wages for Housework Campaign has articulated that struggle over the wage on the part of the unwaged worker, beginning with women, a struggle which, because the protagonist does unwaged work, has been invisible or at any rate not the "real" class struggle.

Second, the autonomous organizations which we have created have shown, as I say, that without this autonomy all the former Internationals, even Marx's First International, could not express the needs of all of us but instead reflected the hierarchy within the working class, confirming it; expressed the needs of the most powerful sectors (of course only partially) often at the expense of the weaker. I was reading a manuscript recently about meetings in Germany in the 1920s where Rosa Luxemburg, a great woman, a great revolutionary, was trying to convince women against their will to have more babies so that the working class could be more numerous and thus stronger.³² Shocking! That is where the Party, the organization which purported to represent every sector but never did and never could, led even her.

The independent organizations and movements we have founded put forward our own demands and discipline and educate more powerful sectors of the working class *to see their interest in uniting with us*. Because — and Marx was, of course, absolutely right about this, as about most things — the point of organizing is to unite. The question is: who unites with whom? Do we unite with the men or do they unite with us? Do "Black and white unite and fight", that is, Black people unite with white people, as the old Left used to have it, or white with Black as the Black movement insists?

Those with more power must unite with those of us with less because we know better what their interests are than they know themselves. Oh yes, we certainly do. Women know, for example, which of men's "victories" are victories for us, and which are defeats for us and therefore ultimately for them. We also know how much we have contributed to all victories, and how much men owe us for that.

In 1973 we said: "How the working class will ultimately unite organizationally we don't know."³³ This was a useful political statement. It didn't presume to have all the answers, and said so, aware that nothing depended on any of us having the answers. But it needs a little updating. One thing that has

happened in the past two or three years which is most encouraging is some indication of how these movements can ultimately come together, or at least how they are beginning to come together. I think they are coming together in the peace movement, especially because of the action of the women of Greenham and what they have spawned in all of us. Woman-led, the best of it Third World oriented, Peace and Money — though this latter is only just beginning to be spelled out. Not only must they not make bombs, but the money they have been using on arms must go to the poorest of both the Third World and the metropolis: to women and children, to those with disabilities, to the elderly... to the unwaged. We all want that, and we all know that we need that, and we are all increasingly ready to accept the leadership of women on that. That is a giant step forward which gives me a lot of courage, and reaffirms my confidence — with Marx — that working class power is inevitable.

Update, 1994

“Feminism”, used here interchangeably with the women’s movement, is now also disputed, often hostile, territory. Many women identify themselves as feminists to express their commitment to the advancement of women. In the last decade, however, feminism has increasingly identified itself as the political strategy which exhorts, and even plans for, women to take waged work as the only road to liberation.

Espoused by Margaret Thatcher when doing her non-traditional job, this strategy is also heralded by Labour’s Harriet Harman: each praises to the heavens the virtues of women working for their own independent money. (Not accidentally, both can afford to refuse to work for the wages to which most women are condemned and to pay to have their housework done by other women — who are presumably being liberated by doing this work for them.)

Ironically, this liberation through waged work is the strategy too of Marxist feminists. At a time of mass and growing unemployment, they romanticize the financial independence to be magically derived from the pittance of most women’s wages. Working outside the home, they have often said, can raise women’s consciousness — presumably to the level of men.

Women’s right to refuse both unwaged dependence at home and waged exploitation outside has not been addressed by either Marxists or feminists — including Marxist feminists. Rather, they have shared the political perspective of the most advanced capitalist planners — some of whom are now women. It is shocking but not surprising then that the State, in coercing women off welfare and out “to work”, has had little opposition. A glaring example was the government’s introduction of the Child Support Act providing an “incentive” to women — by throwing

them off Income Support — to take jobs outside the home. For many months there was no opposition to this from feminists. Others helped the government frame the legislation. Now some oppose, but quietly. Many Marxists too feared it would be “politically incorrect” to oppose the government taking maintenance money from men, even from men on benefits; but political correctness did not extend to valuing women’s unwaged work, recognizing the State’s dependence on it, and supporting women’s claim to money for it from the State.

The result for women of the State’s plans and feminist acquiescence (when they are not themselves the State) has been a disaster for women:

Since 1970, 90 per cent of all new waged jobs in Britain have gone to women (*Independent on Sunday*, 16 May 1993), and it is estimated that 90 per cent of new jobs before 1997 will be filled by women (*The Guardian*, 21 January 1992). “Eight out of every nine jobs created since the end of the recession has gone to a woman. Many are low-paid, part-time jobs in hotels, shops and other services. Employment among men has barely begun to recover after a four-year decline . . .” (*The Independent*, 17 December 1993). In some industries women’s average earnings are 61 per cent of men’s; many part-time women workers earn £70 a week, with hourly rates of under £2.50 (*Independent on Sunday*, 16 May 1993). Black women’s earnings are 86 per cent of white women’s (London Living Standards Survey, 1991); and all women’s are 71 per cent of men’s (Equal Opportunities Commission, 1993).

It was because of the perspective of liberation through waged work that economic demands which would raise the power of women in, and against, waged jobs have taken a back seat in the women’s movement. The protection and increase of Child Benefit, Income Support including for single mothers, pensions for older women, benefits for women with disabilities, all under attack by a government intent on getting more work, waged and unwaged, out of women, have been neglected. Feminists regularly champion free and affordable childcare (not so women can do less work but so they can take on waged work) and equal pay, but they have concentrated their resources on what became the central demand of feminist activists: abortion. There has not even been a gesture towards ensuring the right of women to have as well as not to have children. Now the government is beginning to echo US policy of denying women benefits if they don’t have abortions.

The dual rejection of “women’s work” — exploitation in the home and exploitation out of it — was the starting point of the International Wages for Housework Campaign. In 1972 when we first laid out the theoretical framework of the Campaign, we wrote:

The role of the housewife, behind whose isolation is hidden social labour, must be destroyed. But our alternatives are strictly defined. Up to now, the myth of female incapacity, rooted in this isolated woman dependent on someone else’s wage and therefore shaped by someone else’s consciousness, has been broken by only one action: the woman getting her own wage, breaking the back of personal economic dependence, making her own independent experience with the world outside the home, performing social labour in a socialized structure, whether the factory or the office, and initiating there her own forms of social rebellion along with the traditional forms of the class. *The advent of the women’s movement is a rejection of this alternative.*

Capital itself is seizing upon the same impetus which created a movement — the rejection by millions of women of women’s traditional place — to recompose the work force with increasing numbers of women. The movement can only develop in opposition to this. It poses by its very existence and must pose with increasing articulation in action that women refuse the myth of liberation through work.

... The challenge to the women’s movement is to find modes of struggle which, while they liberate women from the home, at the same time avoid on the one hand a double slavery and on the other prevent another degree of capitalistic control and regimentation. *This ultimately is the dividing line between reformism and revolutionary politics within the women’s movement.*³⁴

20 January 1994

Notes

1. S.James, Introduction to M.Dalla Costa and S.James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, 3rd edn. Falling Wall Press, Bristol 1975, p.10. Later references to this book will be to *Power of Women*.

2. I understand such reliance is a tradition in other societies. The Indian philosopher Patanjali, for example, talks about the need for ongoing "reliable testimony" in order to make valid judgements.

3. We won and mothers kept the money. For the history of the campaign which won Family Allowance in the U.K., see Introductory Essay by S.Fleming, in Eleanor Rathbone *The Disinherited Family*, Falling Wall Press, Bristol 1986.

4. The English Collective of Prostitutes, with the support of Black Women for Wages for Housework and Women Against Rape, occupied the Church of the Holy Cross in protest against "police illegality and racism". See *Network*, News from the English Collective of Prostitutes, No. 1, Summer 1983 (ECP, King's Cross Women's Centre, P.O. Box 287, London, NW6 5QU); and S.James, "Hookers in the House of the Lord" in Joy Holland (ed.) *Feminist Action*, Battle Axe Press, London 1984.

5. The United States was the first, "when young white women headed south on the Freedom Ride buses in the early sixties and discovered that their male (white and Black) comrades had a special place for them in the hierarchy of struggle as capital had in the hierarchy of labour powers . . ." (S.James, *Sex, Race and Class*, Falling Wall Press, Bristol 1985, p.16). But it could only have spread to other sectors and other countries because similar irritants which breed resistance and impulses which open possibilities were present there.

6. "As for women's rivalry, Frantz Fanon has clarified for the Third World what only racism prevents from being generally applied to the class. The colonized, he says, when they do not organize against their oppressors, attack each other . . . If Fanon was not right, that the strife among the colonized is an expression of their low level of organization, then the antagonism is a sign of natural incapacity. When we call a home a ghetto, we could call it a colony governed by indirect rule and be as accurate. The resolution of the antagonism of the colonized to each other lies in autonomous struggle." *Power of Women*, p.46.

7. This is a view popular with separatists: feminists who believe that men — and often women who are with men, including with male children — are the enemy. What follows from separatism is often an attack on all men in theory, and in practice — because they have the least perks and power to bestow — on Black, Third World and working class men.

8. I have not mentioned welfare in this catalogue because in the USA the massive women's movement, led by Black single mothers for wages for housework in the form of welfare, was virtually ignored by the new Women's Liberation Movement, in the same way as its pro-abortion wing ignored the fight against forced sterilization. (Much the same was true in Britain, although here women in the Claimants' Unions pressed their case in Women's Liberation, with some success). Thus the women's movement, which owed much of the impetus which led to its formation to the struggle of Black people and especially to Black women (see *Sex, Race and Class*, p.16), began by ignoring Black women's concerns.

9. Capital and its State have their own reasons for promoting the Left definition of the "working class". To them, "Small [less numerous and therefore less powerful] is beautiful" is an extremely convenient view of the working class. Thus they try to convince almost everyone that s/he is "middle class". But why do we believe it? Since (thanks to the Left) "working class" implies downtrodden, futureless, backward victims, and few of us wants to see ourselves in that defeated way, we often find the middle class label necessary to self-respect.

10. We will not dwell on how much this was an attack on women, but we note the implication, which is that winning even a refrigerator puts the working class in danger of losing the will to win more: the logic of defeat.

11. Readers should know that I am using my own language except where I say otherwise in order for the analysis to be accessible and quickly graspable. While my exposition of Marx's theory of value is not inaccurate, it is of course incomplete: my aim is merely to make the basic connection between unwaged "women's work" and the waged working day. The reader who goes to chapters 4-9 of *Capital*, Vol.1, will be richly rewarded. Marx himself connects the reproduction of labour power directly with the reproduction of capital in chapter 23. "By converting part of his capital into labour-power, the capitalist . . . kills two birds with one stone. He profits not only by what he receives from the worker, but also by what he gives him. The capital given in return for labour-power is converted into means of subsistence which have to be consumed to reproduce the muscles, nerves, bones and brains of existing workers, and to bring new workers into existence. Within the limits of what is absolutely necessary, therefore, the individual consumption of the working class is the reconversion of the means of subsistence given by capital in return for labour-power into fresh labour-power which capital is then again able to exploit. It is the production and reproduction of the capitalist's most indispensable means of production: the worker." pp.717-8.

Readers should also be aware that the rate of exploitation of 100 per cent is a nineteenth century anachronism. Computer technology makes it possible for wages to be produced in minutes; many of us work

for free most of the day. Thus the rate of exploitation today runs in the thousands of per cents. This is not merely a point of information (and aggravation). Marx's theory of communism as "the end of labour" was premised on the inevitable development of such a technology. Here is yet another area of Marx's work which has been largely ignored. The Left on the whole, prefers to campaign for the right to work rather than for the right not to work.

All references to Vol.1 of *Capital* are to the Penguin Marx Library edition, London 1976.

12. Susan Brownmiller, Penguin Books, 1986.

13. "It is not enough that the conditions of labour are concentrated at one pole of society in the shape of capital, while at the other pole are grouped masses of men who have nothing to sell but their labour power. *Nor is it enough that they are compelled to sell themselves voluntarily.* The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws." (Our emphasis.) *Capital*, Vol.1, "Bloody Legislation against the Expropriated since the End of the Fifteenth Century. The Forcing Down of Wages by Act of Parliament", p.899.

14. "Employed or not, we spend 24 hours a day working for capital in the social factory. Waged labourers spend their remaining hours 'after work' reproducing themselves to return to work. Eating, sleeping, drinking, movies, screwing are all essential work which we do in order to be prepared for the next day's labour. These same functions are perhaps even more essential for the 'unemployed' so they will not turn their violence against capital." Beth Ingber, Sidney Ross, Sam Weinstein and others, *The Social Factory* in Jeremy Mulford (ed.) *Falling Wall Review* No.5 (Falling Wall Press, Bristol 1976), p.3.

"... the wages for housework perspective ... has allowed us to understand the 24-hour working day of the international working class and the need to struggle on that level. This is the debt that the whole movement owes to revolutionary feminism." pp.1-2.

15. "The bourgeoisie where it has got the upper hand ... has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment'. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasms, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy waters of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom — free trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation." Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party" in Marx, *The Revolution of 1848*, Political Writings, Vol.1, Penguin, 1973, p.70.

16. *Capital*, Vol.1, pp. 164-5

17. S.James, Introduction to *Power of Women*, p.11.

18. The words "unwaged" and "wageless" were first used in *Sex, Race and Class* (see reference above).

19. Usually but not always. We also sell our labour power directly to the State through welfare.

20. "Previously the worker sold his own labour power, which he disposed of as a free agent, formally speaking. Now he sells wife and child. He has become a slave dealer. Notices of demand for children's labour often resemble in form the inquiries for Negro slaves that were formerly to be read among the advertisements in American journals." *Capital* Vol.1, p.519. Marx adds this footnote: "The shortening of the hours of labour for women and children in English factories was exacted from capital by the adult male workers. In striking contrast with this great fact, we find in the most recent years of the Children's Employment Commission that in relation to this traffic in children, working class parents have assumed characteristics that are truly revolting and thoroughly like slave-dealing. But the pharisaical capitalist, as may be seen from the same reports, denounces this bestiality which he himself creates, perpetuates and exploits, and which, moreover, he baptizes 'freedom of labour'."

21. That women's unwaged work will make up for both men's low wages and the lowering, through cuts in social services, of the "social wage", has long been central to the Wages for Housework Campaign. In 1976 we wrote: "Working class resistance to work, waged and unwaged, has thrown profits into crisis on a world level. In response, trade unions and governments have together constructed an attack to which women are central. Prices are raised, real wages are cut, and social services are run down or abolished . . . Between the Labour Party and the unions, women face the most concerted attack since the Second World War. We are being sent back home without a wage to work twice as hard as before. Our 'flexible' working day at home is stretched to breaking point, cushioning the impact of the State's attack on others. The State calculates that our unwaged housework will bridge every gap in wages and social services. Every plan they make is premised on our work." Introduction by the London Wages for Housework Committee to S.James, *Women, the Unions and Work*, Falling Wall Press, Bristol 1976, pp.1-2.

This view is by now more generally accepted. It should now be clear that the "community care" Mrs. Thatcher has in mind means either more unwaged work for women or that those in need of care should bear the brunt of women's refusal of this extra burden and then condemn women for it. This is the dilemma that women as producers of labour power have always faced. See "The Home in the Hospital" in W. Edmund and S. Fleming (eds.) *All Work and No Pay*, Falling Wall Press, Bristol 1975.

22. And this is not an accidental offshoot of differentials. The struggle over the depression of one sector's wages is *always* the struggle over other sectors' wages. Thus low — unequal — pay for women is what keeps men's wages down.

23. For example, in many Third World countries, nurses, teachers and other waged workers may well be able to afford servants. Because of horrendous rates of unemployment (30, 40, even 50 per cent), domestic workers' wages are notoriously starvation wages. Marx made clear that "Taking them as a whole, the general movements of wages are exclusively regulated by the expansion and contraction of the industrial reserve army . . ." *Capital*, Vol.1, p.790.

24. "... the problem of how to take back the wealth for all the world's people is turned into an act of charity from the havelittles to the havenots." W.Brown, North American Afterword in M.Prescod-Roberts, *Black Women: Bringing It All Back Home*, Falling Wall Press, Bristol 1980, p.42.

25. *Capital*, Vol.1, p.349. quoted in *Sex, Race and Class*, p.13.

26. "... the power which each individual exercises over the activity of others or over social wealth exists in him as the owner of *exchange values*, of *money*. The individual carries his social power, as well as his bond with society, in his pocket . . .

"In exchange value, the social connection between persons is transformed into a social relation between things; personal capacity into objective wealth." K. Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, Penguin 1973, p.157.

27. *Capital*, Vol.1, p.420.

28. *Sex, Race and Class*, p.14.

29. One great change since Marx is the role that immigration has played and is playing in the unification of the working classes on an international level. "... one thing we [immigrants] offer is that we transport struggles from one part of the world to another . . . Immigration is the network along which the international travels." Margaret Prescod addressing the conference "Bringing it all back home: Black and immigrant women speak out and claim our rights", 13 November 1982, in S. James (ed.), *Strangers & Sisters: Women, Race & Immigration*, Falling Wall Press, Bristol 1986, p.85.

30. And with those in our own sector who are bought off or at least are for sale. Careerism in the women's movement is the greatest threat to it, and in fact draws the class line within it. (See the Update which follows.)

31. The most eminent early advocate of back pay for the Black community was Martin Luther King Jr., in his *Why We Can't Wait* (Mentor Books, New York 1964): "No amount of gold could provide an adequate compensation for the exploitation and humiliation of the Negro in America down through the centuries. Not all the wealth of this

affluent society could meet the bill. Yet a price can be placed on unpaid wages." (p.137) Quoted in W.Brown, *Black Women and the Peace Movement*, Falling Wall Press, Bristol 1984.

32. S. Fleming, Introduction to Eleanor Rathbone, *The Disinherited Family*, Falling Wall Press, Bristol 1984.

33. *Sex, Race and Class*, p.19.

34. *Power of Women*, pp.49-50.